

## WILLY BRANDT AND OSTPOLITIK

### Introduction

The government of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), led by Chancellor Willy Brandt, embarked in 1969 upon a policy of Ostpolitik—improved relations with the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Soviet Union. In pursuit of this policy, Brandt held two ministerial-level consultations with representatives of the GDR in the spring of 1970. Following subsequent negotiations at lower levels, several bilateral agreements—signed in 1971 and 1972—increased the volume of cultural and economic traffic across the Inter-German Border (IGB) and formalized mutual recognition of each state's political legitimacy. Ostpolitik also contributed to conclusion of the 1971 Quadrapartite Agreement which clarified the political and economic links between West Berlin and the Federal Republic.

By Brandt's own account, his policy was only partially successful, as much as he underestimated the resistance his initiatives would face.<sup>1</sup> Yet, we often recall Ostpolitik as the successful catalyst which ushered in the decade of superpower detente. Following in the footsteps of Brandt's policy, the US and Soviet Union reached numerous agreements during the 1970s which stabilized—if not reduced—the intensity of the deadlocked ideological and military confrontation between East and West. Today, with that confrontation all but moot, we might question whether Ostpolitik was a landmark

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<sup>1</sup> *People and Politics: The Years 1966-1977* by Willy Brandt. Translated from the German by Maxwell B. Epperson. Little Brown and Company (London), p. 166.

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foreign policy with broad general implications or instead, simply an historical artifact of the Cold War. After reviewing the ends Brandt sought and the means he chose to accomplish them, this paper argues that Brandt's Ostpolitik contains relevant lessons for contemporary American policymakers, and that his policy is one of long standing significance.

## **Ends and Means**

### Basic Assumptions and National Interests

Willy Brandt possessed a remarkably clear understanding of the FRG's place in the world of the late 1960s. He assumed that the relationship between the US and the USSR governed both the political map and the economic lifestream of Europe particularly with regard to Germany. Like De Gaulle in France nearly a decade earlier, Brandt also understood that while the Western powers shared many interests with his country, the allies' national interests were not totally congruent with German interests. Put bluntly, Brandt understood that it fell to the Germans themselves to pursue German interests.

As a result of World War II, Germany's interests were—in Brandt's eyes—unique. Germans were deprived by the post war partition of a single state to encompass German nationhood. Thus, national existence, usually a state's prime interest, was secondary to the imperative of German cultural existence.<sup>2</sup> Other German interests such as peace, justice, economic well being, and acceptance in the international community, were much like those of other states. But even these interests were colored to some extent by the nation's political division. Threats to German interests came most directly from the East and indirectly from Western allies who failed to resist Communist subversion of their—and West German—rights in East Berlin and East Germany. With an accurate picture of

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<sup>2</sup> Long survival of the FRG was, in any case, underwritten by NATO and the Western Powers.

his environment and an in depth assessment of his nation's interests. Brandt carefully selected the objectives of his strategy

### Objectives

Simply put, through Ostpolitik Brandt strove to improve relations with the GDR and Soviet Union to prevent—and reverse where possible—the building of a cultural and economic wall which threatened to divide the German people like the physical wall which the communists had erected along the IGB.<sup>3</sup> This invisible wall took many forms: East German limitations on family visits, trade barriers, and postal and communications restrictions. It was precisely in these and similar areas, which were for the most part interpersonal and commercial transactions among private citizens, that Brandt sought agreement and concessions from the East.

The modest cultural and economic objectives of Ostpolitik served a variety of interests, the most important being the continuation of a unitary German identity. Ostpolitik also contributed to peace and to prosperity in both Germanys by lowering the rhetoric of confrontation and by yielding mutual economic benefit. Agreements with the East also solidified the position of West Berlin as an integral component of the Western camp—a psychologically important element of particular value to the inhabitants of the FRG—and one which played an important role in eventual German unification. The beauty of Ostpolitik as a policy was that it served all these interests—and accomplished its objectives—in spite of the FRG's "powerlessness" in an absolute sense.

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<sup>3</sup> We can debate whether German unification was among the objectives Brandt pursued in Ostpolitik. No doubt, national unification was perceived as a long term collective goal in Germany. However, when he became Chancellor of the Federal Republic in 1969, Brandt—even the socialist—recognized the presence of extremely strong and historically legitimate resistance to German political unification among the governing powers of East and West as well as within certain German political circles. Thus, unification could not really be pursued as a long term national collective—in the context of the policy of Ostpolitik—by the government of the FRG during the period in question. But, Brandt must surely have noted that the success of Ostpolitik could lead, as it did, to creation of conditions which would facilitate eventual German unification.

## Power

Stalin's question, "How many divisions has the Pope?" exemplifies the classic misunderstanding of the nature of power. In Germany's case, it was a fact that, as a small nation caught between two superpowers, the FRG possessed little national political, military, or economic power on an international scale. Yet, like the Pope, the FRG's power could not be measured solely in divisions. An astute politician, Willy Brandt realized that his country was far from powerless. The elements of that power were not obvious, and it reflects Willy Brandt's brilliance that he so clearly perceived them.

Domestically and across the IGB, Brandt could call upon the cohesive power of German culture and nationalism. In addition, astride the traditional invasion route to France, the Benelux and Britain, and at the forefront of NATO-Warsaw Pact confrontation, the FRG possessed undeniable geopolitical power. Looking West, the FRG could—if trust were maintained with the US—wield political and economic power to reduce tensions between East and West and to lower American military costs in Europe while the US continued to fight a costly war in Southeast Asia. Looking far to the East, Brandt's skilful political maneuvering could provide the USSR the perception of a welcome softening along NATO's perimeter of containment. Closer to home, the FRG could tantalize the leadership of the GDR with economic incentives as well as the promise of legitimacy as a state equal in legal stature to the FRG. All these elements of national power were at Brandt's disposal; they offered powerful enticements, indeed. With power at hand, all that remained for Brandt was the delicate task of executing a strategy which implemented his policy.

## Strategy

Brandt's strategy in the implementation of Ostpolitik focused on diplomacy and bargaining. To the US, he offered assurances of his loyalty to the West before beginning negotiations with the GDR. These assurances accepted, Brandt kept the US informed of

his progress in secret communications between his emissary and the president's national security advisor throughout bilateral negotiations with the GDR.<sup>4</sup> In a similar way, Brandt apprised Moscow of his initiatives, especially where the assistance of the Soviet Union could prove useful in securing cooperation from the government of the GDR. In negotiations with the East Germans, he listened beyond the communist rhetoric to focus on areas of agreement between the two sides and to leave the door open for subsequent negotiations. This negotiating strategy, coupled with the FRG's power to offer incentives to all parties, was key to Brandt's eventual success. The agreements which eventually resulted from this process increased the normalcy of the daily lives of the many Germans whose activities required the transfer of goods, services, or persons across the IGB. More importantly, through Ostpolitik, Willy Brandt succeeded in perpetuating the bond of German culture between the inhabitants of the FRG and GDR. For this alone, he deserves the thanks of all the citizens of the new Germany.

### **Three Lessons of Ostpolitik**

Are there lessons that we can draw from this chapter in the Cold War which apply to the current circumstances of the United States? I think there are at least three and that all are lessons in the nature of national power.

#### The Power of Nationalism

The first lesson is one we have been taught before—but which we often forget—that cultural nationalism is a locus of substantial power. Through Ostpolitik, Brandt demonstrated that even oppressive states cannot resist the tide of cultural affinity indefinitely; to the contrary, he was able to harness cultural power to facilitate change in the behavior of the government of the GDR. Products of a multicultural, immigrant society, US decisionmakers are predisposed to underestimate the power of nationhood—

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<sup>4</sup> Henry Kissinger, The White House Years (Little, Brown, and Company), 674, 62, 419-420.

a tool of statecraft still routinely employed internationally and domestically by many states—both as an obstacle to policy and as a unifying force.

We Americans are often frustrated by ardent nationalism, especially when it results in seemingly senseless military confrontation such as that currently ongoing in Yugoslavia. In understanding nationalism, I think we need to come to the same realization that Brandt did, namely, that modern states and cultural nations are separate entities and that nationhood may fall beyond the scope of control by the state. Thus, when specific ethnic groups are threatened by state actions, we may anticipate negative reactions to ensue. Conversely, we can expect that state actions which do not threaten cultural identities, even changes as dramatic as European economic integration, will likely not produce violent cultural reactions, even in states with proud cultural heritages.

### The Power of Weakness<sup>3</sup>

The second lesson of Ostpolitik is derived from Brandt's analysis of Germany's power. Just how is it that such ambitious objectives were achieved with so few resources? I think Brandt's success is proof that in a modern state, considerable power can coexist with apparent weakness and that limited means do not necessarily restrict an actor to limited ends, if those means are thoughtfully employed. We observe similar power beyond means today in the actions of Israel and—until he squandered it—in the policies of Saddam Hussein. Looking homeward, we might propose with an air of optimism that despite relative decline and the federal deficit, our own weaknesses may also bear the seeds of national power.

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<sup>3</sup> We might also consider its corollary, i.e., the Weakness of Power. Proposing that the US could not have prevented China from pursuing Ostpolitik, we are left to contemplate how it is that states with seemingly great power often fail in achieving their foreign policy objectives. Herein lies an important differentiation between potential and actual power. Clearly, power that cannot be used cannot be employed in our calculations of national power relative to specific circumstances.

### The Power of the Policymaker

The third lesson flows from the previous two. It is Brandt the policymaker who recognized the force of German culture and who crafted diplomatic success. His lesson to us is that effective employment of national power often relies on the capabilities and vision of the policymaker or a key advisor. In our own nation, which delights in vilifying its heroes, can there be any wonder at the scarcity of "great men" called to public service? Where the US often focuses on the polish of its tools of national power and worries about their strength, Willy Brandt successfully implemented Ostpolitik with modest, worn tools coupled with the skill of a master politician. While our tools remain capable, we can only wonder at the skill of our next generation of political leadership.

### **Conclusion**

Poised at the end of a political age, America remains in search of enlightened and innovative strategies to replace our accustomed reliance upon power-based containment of the Soviet Union. In terms of challenges, Brandt's world was similar. For its era, Ostpolitik was an audacious policy, yet it was both forward-looking and ultimately successful. Ostpolitik reflected one policymaker's acute sensitivity to the political environment and depended upon his political mastery for its execution. In the final analysis, Brandt's policy was conducted through skillful manipulation of the traditional tools of statecraft. Times have changed, but the tools remain. For that reason alone, Ostpolitik teaches lessons of enduring value.